

Along the track

The Prism

My brother lived in a retirement home interstate for four or five years until his death a couple of years ago. He celebrated Mass there every Sunday for the residents and the many neighbours who chose this as their place of worship. On one Sunday when I happened to be visiting, we all listened to the readings and he began his homily with this question:

What did you hear today? What words from these readings have stayed with you?

He waited. And waited. And waited. Finally a couple of people responded, and then a few more, then more. Some heard words that they remembered from hearing these readings during childhood. Others found words of hope and encouragement, others were challenged. Some heard words that reflected their view of a judgemental God, One to be feared.

Two ideas struck me.

What do I hear as I go about life? It is a good question to ask ourselves. What have I heard today that has stayed in my mind? Did I focus on the positive or the negative? Was I so focussed on myself that I missed what others were talking about, some important messages perhaps? Did I listen only to those I agree with? Did I really listen or was I waiting to jump in with my response, my own story?

What has that got to do with listening to the Scriptures? We call the Scriptures 'the living word' because it speaks to our lives, and gives life. If we are open to it, that word makes its home in our minds and in our hearts. If we are open to it. Listening is a skill that requires nurturing and practice. We tend to see and hear the world through the prism of our own experiences. If our experiences have been negative, we tend to hear the negative. If they are positive, we tend to be more alert to the encouraging, the optimistic messages.

We hear God's word through that prism too. The parable of the Sower and the Seed is all about our ability, our readiness to hear, to receive this living word. Are we too busy, too switched off religion, too cynical perhaps, too doubting to hear? We think we've heard it all before? Many writers today talk of the infallibility of atheism. In the atheist's view, there can be no other way of seeing or thinking.

The Gospels tell the stories of how Jesus interacted with people – in word and action He brought them the Good News about God's love, forgiveness and support. He listened to people, He understood their lives. He showed them in word and action healing and forgiveness, He spoke words of comfort and challenge. He listened closely to people, he gave them 'the time of the day' and was alert to fakery and cynicism. So he couched his message in terms that this varied audience might understand, as the parable explains.

But some could not hear him. Their life experience made them feel that listening to rules and regulations was the way to salvation. Some simply rejected his message as unacceptable, some felt it too 'soft' or some too hard. It was not the Good News they were expecting. Others were fearful. Others were open to Jesus and His message. They listened, they asked questions, they were eager to learn and so they were open to others, open to the ways of God that are often surprising. They listened with both head and heart.

When we listen to the Living Word, that's what we are asked to do, to listen with an open mind and heart. But that will only happen if we have learned to listen to others in that way, to stay silent, to reflect and listen. Listening takes the head and the heart.

Listening is in short supply today. Everyone has an opinion, a solution they want to share.

So when someone asks me to listen to them and I start giving advice, I am not listening.

When someone asks me to listen to them and I tell them they shouldn't feel that way, I am not only trampling all over their feelings and anxieties. I am not listening.

When someone asks me to listen, then listen. Don't start talking or offering solutions. If the person who asked you to listen wants solutions, they will ask.

So just listen. In turn, that person might want to listen to what you have to say.

So what did you hear today?

Regards
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